

Story and Meditation: Reach Out

June 27, 2021

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

Mark 5:21-43

by *Eric Anderson*

For many people, floating gently in the ocean has been a good place to consider the next direction of one's life. There's something comforting and relaxing and invigorating and inspiring about the feel of water all around and the sun's heat beaming down from above. Plenty of people have said, "Yes! I'll do this new thing!" after emerging from the waters.

For sea creatures, there is no other place to consider the direction of one's life. Leaving the water when you can't breathe air is, I regret to say, a pretty effective way for these creatures to really reduce their options in life.

For an anemone larva, bobbing about near the ocean's surface seemed like an excellent place to consider life choices. So far, there hadn't been much to choose. After emerging from its egg, the larva had basically swum around like a wriggling thing and tried to find food to eat on the one hand – not that it had hands – and trying not to become food for something else to eat on the other hand – just to remind you: it didn't actually have any hands.

The choices weren't all that varied. It came down to drifting along with the currents near the sunshine, or sinking down to the seabed – to the rocks and corals – not far below to attach itself.

The larva had had some rough moments. There'd been some really close calls with closing jaws, and it had snatched its tiny tentacles away from danger several times. For quite a while it had been floating curled up in a tiny ball, only opening up to paddle away from something that looked dangerous, or to catch some tiny morsel of food that was safely close.

Stay floating, or sink to the seabed? Neither one seemed safe – at least swimming about it might avoid danger rather than being attached to a rock, but perhaps it could hide in some rocky crevice and avoid notice entirely. Deciding to hold its tentacles in, however, was a decision in itself. Without them waving about in the water to keep it buoyant, the clutched-in anemone larva descended.

There the gentle currents washed it back and forth over the rocks and corals, and it still had a decision to make. Stay curled up tight, or reach out to grip something and find a place. Curling up, frankly, meant a lot of bumps and not a lot of food. Reaching out, though... could it do it? Would it do it?

It did it.

With what I suppose we'd have to call a tail but which became more of a base the anemone reached out, seized a rock, and hung on. That seemed to work. The connection was nice and firm, but it could actually move slowly – very slowly – if it cared to. Reaching out had been a good thing.

It still held its tentacles close, however, in a small colorful ball. Again, it had a choice: stay curled up tight, or reach out. Curl up or reach out. Curl up or reach out. It wasn't much of a choice, though, because with those tentacles in a ball it couldn't eat. So... it reached out. One tentacle at a time, it reached out.

And suddenly there was food.

Staying curled up in a little ball hadn't done much good for our anemone.

Reaching out, however, gave it a good life.

In these two stories of healing found in Mark's gospel, there's some reaching and some holding and some grabbing going on. I titled this sermon "Reach Out" before taking a closer look at the translation questions here. Yes, people reach out – but when they do, they're doing more than just lightly touching.

Let's start with Jairus. He came down to the shore of Galilee with a clear and urgent agenda. His daughter was ill – she was nearing her end. The word Mark used to describe her condition was *eschatos*, which in English usage means "the end." We frequently use it to describe the end of time and history and Creation itself. Jairus fell at Jesus' feet and begged repeatedly – repeatedly – for Jesus to place a hand on her so that she would be healed and live. He wasn't making a polite invitation. He was desperate.

Lots of people seemed to know about this. Jesus had sailed across the lake for a bit – you might remember there was some difficulty about that from last week's text – and apparently people had kept watch for his return. I can imagine that Jairus in particular must have wondered whether to stay by his daughter's side or wait by the lakeshore for Jesus' return. Mark captured his desperation very well.

Jesus, as we'd expect, went with Jairus and whatever other family members and this other crowd of people; they all headed for Jairus' house where the girl was, jostling one another in the narrow village streets, trying to avoid stepping on toes and tripping over one another so that the Teacher – no, so that the Healer – could arrive on time.

Along the way, however, there was an interruption. A woman reached out of the crowd and grabbed Jesus' cloak. Our translation renders that rather mildly as "touched," but the Greek word Mark used has more the feeling of "fasten onto or stick to," and is even used with the sense of setting fire to something. It's a strong word, and Mark used it repeatedly. The woman

fastened onto Jesus' cloak, based on the belief that she'd be well if she fastened onto Jesus' clothing. Jesus then asked, "Who fastened onto my clothes?"

And in case you were wondering if it's the same word when the disciples asked "How can you ask who grabbed you?" – Yes, it's the same word.

Jesus might have stopped there – stopped not because he'd stopped to speak with this woman newly returned to health, but because the word came that the girl had died. Now the reaching out was no longer a hand to pull him along or a hand stretched out to fasten onto healing, but a hand raised to stop. That hand: Jesus ignored that hand. He pressed through the stop signs and the jeers – they apparently jeered when he said the girl was sleeping – and got to the girl herself. And then he took her hand. Again, Mark's wording is curious and distinct. The verb, *kratasa*, means to take hold of, but it also means to have power, to be master of.

And he certainly did master whatever had afflicted her, up to and including death itself.

There's a whole lot of reaching out and seizing hard and holding fast going on.

It's working, too.

The woman – and don't you just wish that somebody had remembered her name? – the woman grabbed Jesus' outfit and she grabbed her healing. As Emerson Powery writes at Working Preacher, "After his initial 'glare' (*periblepeto*) at the crowd and surroundings, Jesus' reaction was rather surprising. What flowed from him ('power') earlier healed her. Now, what flowed from her ('truth') would bring forth healing, confirming words: 'Daughter, your faith has made you well!'" The act of faith to seize what she could not find elsewhere, the act of faith to grab what no one else had offered her, the act of faith to fasten onto what she needed in the depths of her body: that act had made her well.

Likewise Jairus: he had made that choice to go find the Teacher, the Healer, as soon as he could be found. Mark didn't describe him grabbing onto Jesus, but his appeal from heart and soul certainly grabbed Jesus' heart. Jesus was so held in that commitment to heal that he would not be stopped by bad news or bad-news bearers. That act of reaching out brought Jesus to the house and to the girl and to the need.

Jesus also reached out, taking hold of the girl's hand with power and authority and a healing strength that was greater than the power of death itself. It's worth noting that he reached out to the astonished people around her, too, telling them that a newly healed twelve-year-old might need – did need – something to eat. Jesus reached out and made her well.

For a moment in this story you and I might be forgiven for thinking that having healed one, Jesus could not heal both. D. Mark Davis writes at Left Behind and Loving It, "Mark is messing with us here. While Jairus' plea is urgent and time is of the essence, Jesus takes the time to find out who - in the massive crowd - touched him. And he hears her story - in v.33 she tells him 'the

whole truth.' Imagine Jairus tapping his feet, too solicitous to interrupt but too desperate to wait kindly. In fact, Jairus' worst nightmare seems to come true - they waited too long and now it is too late. It would seem that Jesus had a choice - rescue the girl or deal with the woman. That's scarcity thinking. Jesus heals both. That's abundance."

Can we bring some abundance thinking to our lives and to our lives of faith? We have known the desperation of Jairus and we have seen the desperation of others who have suffered unaided by those about them. The woman who endured illness for twelve years would recognize those unjustly imprisoned, those deprived of voting rights, those barred from certain places to live, those unable to obtain medical care. You and I both know that the response to so many of these situations is to say, "If some have this, others cannot, and that's just the way it is."

Jesus didn't think so.

Emerson Powery writes, "Jesus chooses not to leave people in the conditions in which he finds them. And he has the power to alter that condition. Do we? Can the Christian community alter the conditions of people's lives? Can it, too, bring healing into troubled circumstances? Must it not also cross boundaries — whether they are related to ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation, politics or any other boundaries that divide our society — and advocate life-giving meaning and change? May God grant us the courage to do so!"

So much of human response to the needs of the world, to the pains of the world, and to the injustices of the world, is to fall into scarcity thinking, to pull in our tentacles in self-protection, and to leave reaching out to someone else. Mark here is echoing Jesus' encouragement across the ages: it's reaching out that makes a difference. It's reaching out that heals. It's reaching out that saves.

Jesus has been reaching out since those days in Galilee. God has been reaching out for long centuries before. Will the Holy Spirit, reaching out, find us reaching back? Will the Holy Spirit, reaching out, find us reaching out in healing to one another? Will the Holy Spirit, reaching out, find us seeking and sharing the power of God?

May God grant us the courage to do so.

Amen.